

Hermeneutical Truth and Theological Method

By Ted Peters

THE MOST IMPORTANT question we can ask of a theological statement is: "is it true?" The fact that theological claims are raised is indisputable. Their number is legion. Not only that, but in many cases these claims appear to disagree with one another. It is the task of theological methodology to lay down the procedure for arriving at the truth which theology attempts to disclose and to clarify the manner and degree to which we can have confidence that its claims are true.

The methodological emphasis of so many twentieth century theologians reflects the driving concern of theology to integrate meaningfully its truth claims with human understanding as we know it through the secular disciplines. Alternative explanations for the objects of religious belief other than those traditionally provided by theology, epitomized by their reduction to psychological projections in Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, have compelled theology to seek out a reformulation of its philosophical foundations. Methodology is that department of systematic theology which attempts to do this. If it is successful, the grounds will have been established for determining to what extent the important question, "is that theological assertion true?", can be answered.

The present article is a study in theological methodology. I will begin with an explication of the problematic relationship between truth and method, and then proceed to draw implications for theology from the analysis of this problem which has taken place in recent continental discussions of philo-

1. R. G. Collingwood once remarked, "the only question that matters about a philosophy is whether it is right or wrong." *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 173. The same applies to a theology, at least from the point of view of the theologian. The position differs somewhat from that taken by Langdon Gilkey's very influential book, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), where a distinction is drawn between the "meaning" and the "validity" or "truth" of theological assertions. Professor Gilkey contends that the meaningfulness of "God-Language" at this juncture is a more compelling concern for theologians than is its validity. As the present discussion unfolds, I hope it will be demonstrated that the questions of meaning and truth in theology are so inter-dependent that they finally merge into one question. "... The terrain where the truth of faith is decided has always been theology's proper place." Roger Hazelton, "Truth in Theology," *The Christian Century*, LXXXVIII, No. 25 (June 23, 1971), 772.

* Ted Peters (Ph.D., Chicago) is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana 70118.

sophical hermeneutics. My conclusion will be twofold: first, because of the finite or provisional character of all theological concepts or statements, the criterion for their truth will be their relative adequacy for illuminating the broadest scope of human experience and, second, because the categories for such statements must be derived inevitably from the historical tradition within which they are made, the appropriate primal form of theological method is that of historical study.

Truth

What is truth? The operating definition of "truth" for this discussion will be: truth is the uncovering or disclosure of what-is. Although theology makes many assertions which it may claim to be true, the truth which it intends to disclose is one. "What-is," like the term "Being," is inclusive of all of the individual things or beings that "are" as well as referring to the whole or totality of what-is. It is a distinct feature of theology, and in some cases of philosophy, to press beyond an understanding of the individual things of our universe for a disclosure of the character of reality as a whole. God is the referential object of theological discourse, and the concept "God" refers to the fundamental universality or ground in relation to which all beings and principles are oriented. It is this innate thrust towards universality that compels theology to look beyond the individual truths of things to the truth of what-is in its wholeness.

In distinction from theology, the natural sciences, social sciences and technological disciplines seek only the truths of the various component parts of the whole. For example, consider this paragraph in the introduction to Willard Van Orman Quine's *Methods of Logic*:

Truths are as plentiful as falsehoods, since each falsehood admits of a negation which is true. But scientific activity is not the indiscriminate amassing of truths; science is selective and seeks the truths that count for most, either in point of intrinsic interest or as instruments for coping with the world.²

The fact that the scientist or logician can "select" truths according to their relative importance, and that each truth statement corresponds to an alternative falsehood, demonstrates that this is a concern for the truth of things within the whole rather than of the whole itself, with the truth of beings rather than of Being-itself.

The modern mind which is shaped by the scientific perspective on things demonstrates an implicit loyalty to the "correspondence notion of

2. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Methods of Logic* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1950), p. xi.

truth." Its roots lie in the ancient Greek concern, which reached its zenith in the philosophy of Descartes, that the assertions or judgments of language correspond to the real things of the world beyond them. Aristotle held that a statement is true if what it says corresponds or agrees with the object of which it speaks, and it is false if it is at variance with the object. From this developed the long trusted definition of truth as *adequatio intellectus ad rem*, adequation of the intellect and thing. True knowledge is the having of a rational idea that conforms with the object of which it is an idea. The criterion for measurement of such truth lies in the degree of correspondence or conformity, and non-truth appears as non-correspondence or non-conformity. Charles Hartshorne sums it up: truth is "agreement with reality."³

The implications of the correspondence theory of truth, sometimes referred to as propositional truth or objective truth, would lead us to understand that the locus of truth is found in the assertion or judgment of a thinking subject, and that the essence of truth lies in the corresponding agreement between that assertion or judgment and its referent.⁴

Heidegger places the right question to this model of truth: what are the conditions required in order to render possible their correspondence? How are we to understand ontologically the relation between the idea and the object? What is it that characterizes every instance of truth as truth? For it is the answering of these questions which will disclose to us just what the essence of truth itself must be.⁵

The essence of truth, presumably discovered at the conclusion of Heidegger's prescribed analysis, becomes the unhiddenness or the uncovering of Being. This is clearly a hermeneutical concept of truth, because it implies that something may first be hidden. Truth must be wrested from our world; it is, as it were, a robbery.⁶ Heidegger refers us to the original Greek experience of truth expressed in the privative term ἀληθεια (*Unverborghenheit*, unhiddenness).⁷ Plato originally conceived of truth as the emergence of

3. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962), p. 165.

4. Pertinent discussions of the correspondence theory of truth can be found in secondary materials dealing with Heidegger's refutation of the same, e.g., W. B. Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion: Martin Heidegger's Notion of Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1967), pp. 3-26; William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), pp. 94, 213f.; Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (New York: Harper & Row, Torchbook edition, 1970), pp. 123-31.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson from the seventh edition of *Sein und Zeit*, Neomarius Verlag, Tübingen (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 258-59 (SZ. 215).

6. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 265.

7. *Aletheia* is a compound of the privative prefix *a-*, meaning "not," with the verbal stem *leth*, meaning "to escape notice" or "to be concealed." It is thus rendered *Un-verborghenheit*, Un-hiddenness, Un-concealment. The truth is that which is discovered, *ent-deckt*. Cf. *Being and*

the hidden into unhiddenness, the manifestation of Being in the context of human experience as a whole. The true is the letting be of Being itself. To say that an assertion is true signifies that it uncovers a being as it is in itself; it lets the being be seen in its uncoveredness.

Thus truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the object). Being-true as Being-uncovering, is in turn ontologically possible only on the basis of Being-in-the-world. This latter phenomenon, which we have known as a basic state of *Dasein*, is the foundation for the primordial phenomenon of truth.⁸

Heidegger is saying that correspondence between idea and thing has the nature of a relationship, and that relationship is grounded in a prior unity of subject and object. That prior unity is *Dasein's* inescapable being-in-the-world. An assertion is a form of discourse functioning at the predicative level; however, there is something prior to the formulation of thought into language, prior to the sphere of discourse, and that is the sphere of manifestation. Language is not an autonomous sphere of its own, but in order to exist it must be open to experience and function ontologically as the self-manifestation of Being itself.

When philosophical or theological reflection wishes to uncover the nature of what-is in totality, or Being itself, it must go beyond the correspondence theory of truth because every statement about what-is is itself part of what-is. One can never step out of Being for a moment to take a look at it and then say something in addition which reveals something about it. Because we ourselves are always an integral participant in the being of what-is, no statement about what-is can itself fully correspond to what-is. Consequently, truth as the disclosure of what-is in its totality or universality requires a kind of access which goes beyond the correspondence construct. To evaluate the possibilities of and to explicate the procedures for finding access to this kind of truth is the task of methodological reflection in philosophical theology.

Method

What is method? The operating definition of "method" for this discussion will be: a way or means for disclosing the truth, implying a reflective structuring of understanding on the part of the one to whom truth is to

Time, p. 57, n.1 (SZ. 33), p. 262 (SZ 219f); "On the Essence of Truth," *Existence and Being*, ed. by Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., Gateway edition, 1949), p. 306; "The Origin of the Artwork," *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. by Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: Modern Library, 1964), pp. 664, 676.

8. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 261 (SZ. 218-9).

be disclosed. The terms "method" and "methodology" are not exactly synonymous and can be, in general, distinguished. "Methodology," like other disciplines ending in "...logy," refers to the general reflection over the problems of method in research. "Method" refers to the systematic and ordered inquiry itself, and to one or another particular method as ideally conceived or practically applied. The adjective, "methodological," refers us to the concerns of methodology, while "methodical" or "methodic" can be understood in the ordinary sense of referring to systematic or orderly reflection in accordance with a method.

The Greek roots, *μεθ* and *δός* mean literally "with a way." The word *δός* denotes a way, a road, or a highway, often with connotations of conduct, e.g., a "way" of eating. Thus, our interest in methodology centers on the way in which what-is is uncovered and disclosed, i.e., the way to truth.

But there is a double-sidedness to method: as a way for uncovering truth it distorts as well as discloses. As a particular way, each method has its own structure, and that structure tends to limit the disclosure of what-is to forms discernible in terms of that structure. A method draws the limits of what can be known before it becomes known; it effectively hides truth because it prevents the disclosure of what-is that lies beyond the scope of what the method can include.

The inevitable distortion wrought by methodical research is poignantly described in the philosophical analyses of human understanding undertaken by the later Heidegger, and subsequently by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Although it is the self-evident goal of the sciences to discern reality as it is, method has become a threat to this aim.

The sciences know the way to knowledge by the term "method." Method, especially in today's modern scientific thought, is not a mere instrument serving the sciences; rather it has pressed the sciences into its own service. Nietzsche was the first to recognize this situation "It is not the victory of science that distinguishes our nineteenth century, but the victory of scientific method over science."⁹

Heidegger says that it is in the thinking man where we find a place for Being to open up and reveal itself. But "thinking" for Heidegger does not refer to the objectifying conceptualization carried on by metaphysical philosophy or the mathematical calculation of science. Rather, it refers to a primal thinking, pre-thematized, in which the unveiling of being-as-it-is occurs. In distinction from scientific calculation and objective methods, which derive from the initiative of the scientist, primal thinking *comes* to the thinker from his subject matter.

9. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 74.

But in thinking, the situation is different from that of scientific representation. In thinking there is neither method nor theme, but rather the region (*Gegend*, area, expanse), so called because it gives its realm and free reign (*weil sie das gegnet, freigibt*) to what thinking is given to think. Thinking abides in that country, walking the ways of that country. Here the way is part of the country and belongs to it. From the point of view of the sciences, it is not just difficult but impossible to see this situation.¹⁰

The region has its own paths and bypaths; method blazes its own trails like a foreign intruder who does not know the paths of the region and would prefer to make his own rather than to find out what is already there.

The hermeneutical imperative for Heidegger, and subsequently for Gadamer, is to take a stand over against methods and methodology, asserting that the laying down of a method is just a way of reducing the impact of the Being one is encountering. Methods tend to silence the speaking of Being because they lead us to listen to only what we want to hear. The phenomenon is thus distorted by the desires and aims of the hearer and every disclosure takes on the character of a forced confession, a surrender to the will-to-power of modern man.

We are immersed in Being, in whatever-is as a whole, so that there is no Archimedian point where we can go to get a good look at what-is, i.e., where our world can become an object for us. Thus, any object which we perceive and reflect upon is an object abstracted and lifted out of the total context of what-is.¹¹ Being-itself, especially in its totality, continues to elude our objective apprehension. In so far as an object within that totality of what-is has come to our attention, and in so far as we believe our apprehension of that abstracted object is a full disclosure of what-is, then what-is itself is distorted and hidden for us.

A method, of course, provides a specific way of structuring our objectifications of reality as it discloses itself and, thereby, the contours of its distorting can be predicted in advance. This is not particularly a denunciation of applying method to scientific or scholarly study, but rather it is a description of the inevitable nature of the case, namely, that method must

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

11. From the perspective of the modern sciences, this abstracted object is what is called a fact, and the manipulation of individual facts in relation to each other is the goal of scientific and technological methods. To return these abstracted facts to their place in the whole at the reflective level is the goal of speculative theology, and philosophy as well. A. N. Whitehead says it this way: "It (Philosophy) seeks those generalities that characterize the complete reality of fact, and apart from which any fact must sink into an abstraction. But science makes the abstraction, and is content to understand the complete fact in respect to only some of its essential aspects. . . . A philosophical system should present an elucidation of concrete facts from which the sciences abstract." *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 187.

distort. The only occasion for a denunciation, then, would be one in which the individual employing a particular method presumed that the knowledge he gained was absolutely definitive for understanding what-is itself, i.e., that it provided either the final mode for uncovering the truth or, even worse, the final truth itself. It is this presumed hegemony which modern natural science claims over knowledge in general, not unlike the dogmatic presumptuousness of religious authorities in bygone eras, that needs criticism.

On the other hand, we must keep in mind that the uncovering of what-is is not something divorced from all methods. A method is a planned procedure employed for the specific purpose of uncovering what-is, of discovering truths, and the successes of modern scientific method are in no way to be diminished. A method is the way to truths, i.e., it is the way to uncover the relationships which exist between the various objects or facts which we have abstracted from their context of the whole of what-is. Thus, when a theologian wishes to talk about God's universality or when a philosopher wishes to talk about ontology, it is evident that a "way" must be found to get beyond this objectivist schema. The problem, of course, is that if a method by definition provides a structure and form to its subject matter, thereby objectifying it, then how can it get beyond itself to the comprehensive wholeness of reality which defies objectification?

Is there any way to get to what-is itself? Is there any way to apprehend that whole of what-is from which both I as a subject and the objects which I apprehend are abstractions? How can truth fully be disclosed? Hans-Georg Gadamer, the philosopher of hermeneutics, answers that method is not the way to truth.¹² For him, if one sees method as a distorting enterprise within human understanding one has already arrived at a fuller understanding of understanding. At this point he makes an ontological turn, positing that the primary way in which a man as *Dasein* is related to what-is in totality is through pre-reflective understanding. The whole is always present at the presuppositional level, conditioning reflection but never becoming accessible to reflection. To come to self-conscious awareness of our primal being-in-the-world, and the radical finitude implied by it, an awareness wrought from beyond the subject-object distortions of every method, is itself the disclosure of all the truth available to the finite human mind. One way to uncover this dimension of truth is to examine the dynamics of the hermeneutical problem and its philosophical implications.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

The Hermeneutical Problem

The hermeneutical problem was originally the problem of understanding ancient texts and involved methodological questions of how best to facilitate and insure adequate understanding. Its two principal roots lie first in Protestant Theology, where the concern was for a proper interpretation of the Bible, and second in the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) which developed subsequent to the rise of the natural sciences.

The hermeneutical problem, of course, did not arise when a book or article was readily understood and assimilated. It did arise, however, when the reader was confronted by a strange text which could not be immediately understood. This was the case especially with ancient texts where temporal distance divorced the reader from the life-context in which the book was written; the tradition in which the text first appeared and the tradition within which the reader stood were estranged from each other. Hermeneutical consciousness arose, then, with the need to interpret, in the sense of translate, the text before it could be understood. Hermeneutics became a methodological search for the proper principles required to insure the adequate interpretation of such a text.

The hermeneutical problem, then, goes beyond being merely the question of method; it is a question of truth. The hermeneutical concern of Protestant Theology was to release the truth contained in Scripture. The concern of the cultural sciences was to understand the truth of historical events and personages in their particularity. The natural sciences had aimed at knowledge in terms of general rules: the truth of the individual is discovered in terms of the appropriate general laws which explain its behavior. The cultural sciences, on the other hand, aimed at knowledge of an individual person or event in its particularity: the truth of an individual is to be found just in the individual itself. The truth of the natural sciences, said Wilhelm Dilthey, is one of explanation (*Erklären*); the truth of the cultural sciences is one of understanding (*Verstehen*).¹³ During the 19th century, the impressive productivity of the natural scientific method inspired such great respect that Dilthey sought to establish an equally respectable but independent method for the cultural sciences. The assumption was that the brand of truth was different in each. But this was in fact not the case, contends Gadamer, as he looks back at the nineteenth century, for the kind of truth claimed by the cultural sciences was unavoidably present at the foun-

13. "The subject matter of understanding is always something individual. . . . Thus we are concerned with the individual as not merely as an example of man in general but as himself." Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History, Thoughts on History and Society* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 111.

dational level of the natural sciences; natural scientific truth required understanding in the sense of *Verstehen* as much as non-scientific truth did. Thus, the question of truth becomes fundamental to all forms of experience.

The resolution of the hermeneutical problem, then, will not consist in a better formulation of already existing scientific methods. The resolution is a philosophical matter; it consists in determining the conditions which make explanation and understanding possible. What we need to understand is not a methodical procedure but rather the nature of human understanding itself.

Descartes and the Inordinate Primacy of the Subject

The reason that a method cannot help but distort when experience is interpreted through it is that the whole idea of method in the first place is founded on a misapprehension of reality. This false picture of reality, which modern science has inherited, issues primarily from the "turn to the subject" by Descartes and the Enlightenment.

"Cartesianism," or "subjectism" (*Subjektivität*) are terms we may use in referring to a complex of tendencies in modern thought which are primarily responsible for the obstruction of truth in the method mania of our time. Descartes is singled out only because his cognitional theory seems to coincide roughly with the wider set of attitudes and climate of thought dominant in western culture since the Enlightenment and the rise of science. Of Descartes, Whitehead wrote, ". . . Descartes only expressed definitely and in decisive form what was already in the air of the period."¹⁴

In his *Discourse on Method* of 1637 and *Meditations* of 1642, Descartes formulated the concern which has since resonated throughout the history of western thought: How can subjectivity dwelling within itself (*res cogitans*) know objects existing outside (*res extensa*) of itself? This problem of our relationship to the external world could be restated as two successive questions, the second being subordinate to the first: (1) How do I as a thinking subject know there is anything out there? (2) If there is an external world of objects out there, then how do I know for certain whether or not my ideas correspond with that external world of objects? This objectivist posing of the problem implies the primordially of the subject-object dichotomy. Descartes has begun with a distorted primacy of the subject, "a soul with activities whose reality is purely derivative from itself,"¹⁵ and which in apparent isolation from the world instrumentally disposes ideas. Reflec-

14. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Lowell Lectures, 1925 (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), p. 177.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

tive thought takes on the character of technical skill with the task of deciding whether or not and just how immanent sensations have transcendent reference to the object out there. Moreover, the subject of this relationship is aware of itself and is distinguishable from other objects only in that it is present to itself in an immediate way.

In trying to reconcile the Galilean version of science with classical and medieval metaphysics, Descartes' own model became mathematics and his procedure basically deductive. The *res extensa*, or exteriority of spatial extension, is projected into *mathesis universalis*. The *res cogitans*, the interior subject, can arrive at abstract self-evidence through the process of deduction based upon principles known instinctively by clear and evident intuition. The attempt here is to correlate the disincarnate subject with the abstract object in such a way as to import into the empirical natural sciences the same measure of apodicticity proper to the Greek model of science. We can know the real objectively because there is a static identity between our methodical perception and mathematical deduction, and this is viewed as matching the immobility, necessity, and certitude of the deductive process from premises to conclusion in the syllogism.

Issuing from this objectivist cognitive theory and scientific ideal is the Cartesian quest for true knowledge. True knowledge here is defined as absolute certainty about necessary, infallible and indubitable fact. The next step is to acquire a method which can afford such certainty. Descartes' fourth rule in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* reads: "There is need of a Method for Finding out the truth." By method he means, according to Gadamer, "a universal procedure for any and every knowledge, describable by fixed rules, controllable by set principles, and capable of sealing off the way of knowledge against prejudices and rash assumptions and in general against the unruliness of guesses and flashes of insight."¹⁶ His methodological criterion of truth was the "clearness and distinctness of ideas," and he resolved to doubt everything until it could pass the test of this criterion. His method of universal doubt, employed in the search for an incontestable foundation for science, blossomed in the Enlightenment's repudiation of prejudice and authority.

There was one thing which Descartes finally could not doubt and which became the foundation for rebuilding an understanding of the world, namely, that he himself existed. *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am."

16. Gadamer, *Philosophisches Lesebuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei GmbH, 1967), II, 72. The translation of this passage is that of Fred Lawrence, whose essay, "Self-knowledge in History in Gadamer and Lonergan," *Language, Truth and Meaning*, ed. by Philip McShane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 167-218, provides considerable clarity on the role Cartesianism plays in Gadamer's thought.

It was the presence of his own subjective consciousness which was so self-evidently and certainly true that it could not be doubted. The priority of this subjective consciousness for all understanding became the dominant theme of our scientific heritage. The question, however, which Heidegger and Gadamer raise, is what is the ontological character of the *sum*? Descartes did not account for the nature of the being doing the knowing. What these two critics of Descartes point out is that there is an important pre-conceptual or pre-conscious disclosure of man's relation to his world. If this is the case, then scientific knowledge which depends upon cognitive consciousness is incomplete and, further, that the requirement for a theoretical rejection of presuppositions and prejudice is undercut.

Long before Descartes, the western world had adopted the correspondence theory of truth as a result of, what Heidegger called, "presentational thinking." It has appeared to our Western mind that when an assertion or proposition corresponds to the facts as they really are, then it is true. This truth was thought to be correct seeing, and thinking was viewed as a matter of presenting an idea before the mind's eye and manipulating it until agreement with reality was attained. And for Descartes truth became more than merely the conformity between the knower and the known; it was the subject's rational certainty of this conformity. In this way, the isolated human subject has been established as the ultimate reference point for the status of all that is seen. What is known is not an independent entity of equal or greater ontological status than that of the knowing subject presenting itself to us as it "is," as disclosing and manifesting itself in its own power of being; rather what is known is an object which the conscious subject presents to itself. Human subjectivity becomes the anchor for understanding our world, and philosophy centers its efforts on understanding human consciousness. This syndrome Heidegger calls modern "subjectism."¹⁷

Subjectism's doctrine of man as the basic measurer of all things has had many cultural ramifications. The world has no meaning except for that which man imparts to it. No goal or meaning can be provided by the world or by history that is not grounded in man's own rational certainty, thereby locking him into the circle of his own projections. Art objects can be only objectifications of human experience and culture only the collective objectification of what human subjects value; they are, writes Richard Palmer, "a projection of the groundless activity of man. Neither cultural

17. The term "subjectism" was chosen as the translation of *Subjektivität* to indicate simply the inordinate primacy attributed to the perceiving and thinking subject by the modern mind. It avoids the many perhaps misleading connotations wrought by the term "subjectivism." See: Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 144-45, 164-65. "Turn to the subject" and "objectivism" are terms sometimes used to refer to this phenomenon.

nor individual human activity can be seen, in this framework, as a response to the activity of God (or of Being) since everything is grounded in Man."¹⁸ A similar evaluation with a theological concern is voiced by Wolfhart Pannenberg:

If thought remained bound to the soil of human subjectivity, this meant the reduction of all contents of consciousness to man, the total hiddenness of God, and even the disappearance of the very word "God." God and the whole world of religion must in that case be understood as mythical projections, self-objectifications of man, as Feuerbach maintained.¹⁹

In summary, the Cartesian tradition has bequeathed to us a transcendent knowing subject,²⁰ disengaged from the objects in the world about him, untainted by personal proclivities and ideally free from all external authority, capable of objectifying mathematically what it perceives in self-evident propositions. The doctrine, essentially formulated in this way, has endured down through the Rationalists, the English Empiricists and Kant. It is this complex of assumptions which gave birth to the fetish over method, and which Gadamer scorns when he says "the modern age . . . is linked to the name of Descartes, where truth becomes certitude, and where the method of knowing the truth becomes more important than the truth known."²¹

Historical Tradition and the Hermeneutical Circle

As an antidote to the distorting tendencies of our methodological bias, Gadamer describes human understanding as a historical event, a tradition-event (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*). The indisputable temporal nature of understanding as a process, in conjunction with the recognition that one is always already in a particular situation—being means being-in-the-world at some particular time and place—indicate the full historicity of the under-

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

19. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (2 Vols. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970-71), II, 197.

20. The word "transcendent" will have two applications in this study. The basic referent of this term is to something that has its being apart from or independent of the being of the world. It is in this sense that the terms "transcendent subject" or "transcendent ego" are meant to refer to a consciousness that exists outside the stream of historical being as we know it. In reference to Descartes' philosophy, Whitehead says he presented us with a distorted primacy of the subject, "a soul with activities whose reality is purely derivative from itself." *Science and the Modern World*, p. 177.

Later in the discussion, the term will apply to the trans-empirical conditions warranted for human existence as we experience it. The postulating of such transcendental foundations are the result of a reflective process initiated by inquiring after the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience as we know it. The particular experience which will be interrogated with this question is the experience of historical understanding. This second usage of the concept of the transcendent is not to be confused with the transcendence of the God of classical theism whose native being was conceived to be independent of the actual world in which we live.

21. Gadamer, *Schriften*, I, 17.

standing subject. We cannot get beyond the finitude and hopelessly temporal character of one's factual existence; there is no independent ego which rises to a vantage point above existence or history where it can get an 'objective' viewpoint.²² One always finds himself standing within a tradition and understanding is itself a finite event of that tradition. "Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*) in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a process, a method."²³

Gadamer calls human understanding the "hermeneutical process" because it can be best portrayed in terms of the hermeneutical circle applied to man's historical dialectic with his tradition.²⁴ The term "hermeneutical circle" is descriptive of the circular character of all human understanding. It maintains that in order to understand the meaning of any one thing we must understand the whole of which it is a part, and, in reverse, to understand the meaning of that whole we must understand the meaning of the individual parts that make it up. For example, those who have learned a foreign language have probably had the experience of discovering words merely by their context in the sentence in which they appear. In fact, some modern methods of language instruction emphasize learning via the contextual structures of language. Students sometimes complain that they find themselves in a dilemma: in order to know the words they must first know the context, but in order to know the context they must first know the words. One may begin by looking the words up in a lexicon or vocabulary list and substitute English equivalents for the foreign words. But as the student begins to project the meaning of the sentence (or even the text) as a whole, the acknowledged context begins to modify and further draw out the meanings of the individual words. The newer meanings of the words then lead to a reformulation of the meaning of the whole sentence. Understanding is

22. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 244f., 252f., 338f., 410.

23. *Ibid.*, 258.

24. In biblical interpretation and classical philological hermeneutics, the circle represents the whole-part dialectic involved in interpreting the meaning of a text. For a word to be understood it must be seen in the context of the sentence in which it appears, and, of course, the meaning of the sentence is dependent upon the meanings of the words which constitute it. Likewise, for a book, to understand any part of it, the reader must first project an understanding of the whole but then be ready to revise it as further understanding of the parts more precisely reveal the meaning of the whole. Thus, understanding is never a totally "new" event, but always depends upon some pre-understanding to make the initial projection of meaning. Gadamer says that our particular place in the history of tradition provides us with the pre-understanding which we take to experience.

a circular enterprise, proceeding from whole to part and then back again from the parts to a new whole.²⁵

The dialectical interaction between whole and part, each of which is required to give the other meaning, leaves one question unanswered: How does one logically enter the circle? Some sort of leap into the circle is required, and that was provided, said Schleiermacher, by intuition.²⁶ The philological rules for interpreting parts and wholes in relation to each other, Schleiermacher believed, needed to be supplemented by a psychological interpretation, i.e., by divination. A literary work has to be understood as a moment in the author's life, so the interpreter must reproduce in himself the experience out of which the work originally grew. This is possible Schleiermacher believed, because the author and the interpreter share in the same human nature which provides each of us with a receptivity (*Empfänglichkeit*) for all others. Therefore, we are never completely out of someone else's hermeneutical circle; we can intuitively enter it just because we share the same human nature. But do we need mystical intuition when we have history?

The hermeneutical circle was accepted as a necessary ingredient for interpretation long before Dilthey, but Dilthey historicized it. For Dilthey, it is meaning that understanding grasps. The whole receives its meaning from the parts, and, reciprocally, the parts can be understood only in the context of the whole. This is true not only for the reading of the text, but the same relationship exists between the parts and the whole of one's life. And meaning is something historical; it is a relationship of whole and parts seen by us from a given standpoint, at a given time. An event or experience can so significantly alter our lives that what was formally meaningful is shifted and takes on a different meaning in light of the new context. However, our view of the context itself is never drawn from an Archimedian point above history but is always a product of its constituent historical parts.²⁷

Interpretation, then, is always an event taking place in a situation, in the context (*Zusammenhang*) in which the interpreter and the text or any other expression of life stand. Meaning is, therefore, always meaning in relationship. It is not something contained with itself or imported from beyond history. It is a real relationship within a nexus prior to the subject-object separation. It is a matter of interaction between an individual person and the objective *Geist* within a hermeneutical circle which presupposes that

25. Cf. Gelven, *A Commentary on "Being and Time,"* pp. 37f.

26. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 8718; Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), pp. 86-7; Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, I, 104.

27. Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning*, pp. 73-4.

both are acting together. "The category of meaning fundamentally grows out of the relation of part to whole that is grounded in the nature of living experience."²⁸ The decisive step taken by Dilthey's epistemology here is that he has drawn the connection between the context of lived experience and the context of history.²⁹

The circularity of understanding has a further but related consequence for hermeneutics: there is no true starting point for understanding because every act of understanding takes place within a finite historically conditioned horizon, within an already understood frame of reference. It is no longer a question of how we are to enter the hermeneutical circle, because human consciousness is always already in it. We understand only by constant reference to what we have already understood, namely, our past and anticipated experience. The experiencing and reflecting subject is never a *tabula rasa* upon which the understanding of raw experience inscribes its objective character; rather, all experience and reflection are the result of a confrontation between one's pre-understanding or prejudice and new or perhaps strange objects. The inevitable presence of pre-understanding or prejudice is not the distortion of the meaning of an object by an arbitrary subject, but it is the bequeathal of the historical tradition to which both subject and object belong, and it is the very condition for any understanding at all. One's particular prejudice or disposition for understanding in a certain way is the peculiar way that he is "internally related" to his tradition and also to the objects of his experience. This is what is meant by Gadamer's emphasis on the radically historical and finite dimension of human existence. "In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it."³⁰

The Universality of Theology

The *élan* which animates the hermeneutical circle and thrusts it along its spiralling path down through the history of human understanding is meaning. Dilthey said that life is characterized throughout as being meaningful and that the category of meaning was dependent upon the whole-part relationship. Every meaningful statement, then, implies a dependence upon the context of the whole of which it is a part. Likewise, meaningful events in a person's life would depend upon the context of the whole of that person's life for the determination of their meaning.

28. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968), VII, 261-62.

29. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 197. The move from a formal analysis of a text's grammar in terms of the whole and part to the necessity for seeing a text within the historical context of which it is a part is vividly presented by Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics" in *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 235-36.

30. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 245.

Let us suggest what might happen if we draw out the implications of this contextual structure of meaning; by expanding the contexts of meaning we eventually reach a notion of universal history.³¹ The meaning of a book, and likewise the meaning of a person's life, is dependent upon the cultural climate in which it appears. And that cultural climate has its place in the still broader context of the world's history of cultural traditions. In so far as you experience meaning there is implied in that experience a broader context and that context in turn eventually implies the ultimate comprehensive totality, the all-determining reality. The whole of history, or the all-determining reality, is implied in the very pre-structure of understanding which admits new experience as meaningful. This presupposed whole is the very condition—transcendent to any methodical analysis—that makes meaning possible in individual events. The whole provides the transcendental condition for the possibility of particular experiences of meaningfulness.

These observations lead us to conclude that there is an inherent convergence between the implications of hermeneutics and the universal claims of Christian theology. Theology must be universal in scope because its object, "God," implies the most comprehensive scope conceivable. Religious assertions take as their reference an experience of the final and comprehensive mystery upon which all being depends, and assertions of the Christian religion in particular refer us to God as the creator *ex nihilo* of all things. Consequently, the very subject matter of theology compels it to be universal in scope, concerning itself not only with the truth about God, but with the truth about any and everything else as well.

Speaking about God as the determining power of all things seems to require that we speak about the whole of reality. Thus, the "turn to the subject" in the Cartesian Enlightenment, which is now fundamental to much of modern thought, ought to provide us with as much difficulty in *theological* understanding as it does for Heidegger and Gadamer with the problem of hermeneutical understanding. The subject-object bifurcation with its inordinate reliance upon the transcendent or isolated subject would seem to require that God be one object among others and accessible to human subjectivity. However, if God is the universal all-determining reality, the determinant of the subject as well as of all objects, then he cannot be one object among many. This argument is most clearly formulated by Paul Tillich, wherein he demonstrates that "God" does not refer to one being among other

31. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, I, 162ff.; II, 61f.

beings but only to Being-itself.³² God can be no less universal than reality itself, or reality as a whole.

Theological thinking, then, seems to require a reflective framework that permits discourse about such a possibility of universality. But such a reflective framework, if it did exist, would itself claim more universality than the statements which depend upon it. Consequently, theological discourse has an inherently constructive quality which projects fundamental visions that may even break the bonds of previous reflective systems. Theological assertions themselves seek to set the perimeters within which the rest of reality comes to be understood. Theology provides the foundational conceptions upon which other conceptions are dependent. A conception of God that is too limited will be unable to integrate the broad range of experience and, hence, will make God seem irrelevant to certain important areas of life. Thus, while recognizing the finite and provisional nature of even these most foundational conceptions, the criterion for determining the truth value of theological assertions will be their ability to illuminate the widest possible realm of human experience; they must point to and from the whole.

Explanatory Adequacy

The criterion for determining the truth of a theological claim is its ability to disclose the being of what-is. But because the being of what-is necessarily includes both the theological claim and the person to whom it purportedly is making such a disclosure, because one always already lives within the reality which is being disclosed, there is no available vantage point from which one can judge "objectively" whether or not the claim accurately presents the reality. Statements that refer to *the* truth or that refer to God are certainly not testable by immediate inspection of their referents from a neutral standpoint. There is no *direct* method of verification.

There is an *indirect* criterion however, which I am calling "explanatory adequacy." The nature of truth as herein defined corresponds to the universal scope of theology. Truth must be the truth of the whole. Theological statements assert something about the whole, because their referent, God, is said to be the all-determining reality. To be adequate, then, a theological explanation must perform the function of ever widening our understanding of finite reality. If God is in truth the all-determining reality, and once an adequate theological claim is presented, then nothing real would be fully explained or understood in its particular reality without reference to God.

32. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 Vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), I, 171-74, 235ff.

Inversely, the announced reality of God should open up a deeper understanding of all reality. To the degree that a theological claim is found to adequately explain the length and breadth of our finite experience, one may speak of a corroboration or confirmation of its truth.

The concept of explanatory adequacy recalls Alfred North Whitehead's rational and empirical criteria for a speculative philosophy. The rational criteria are the system's inner coherence and logic. The empirical criteria are its applicability and adequacy to all experience.³³ The term "explanatory adequacy" as I suggest it is similar to but perhaps more inclusive than "empirical adequacy" as Whitehead used it. I believe it appropriate to presume that the rational criteria of coherency and logic are inherently present insofar as theological method is systematic; in other words, it is assumed for the purposes of this discussion that methods by definition strive to be logical and coherent. What remains is whether a method which leads to theological statements of universal scope is "applicable" and "adequate" to explain the finitude and historicity of human experience. And because the question of truth is so interwoven with the question of universality, the criterion that comes to the fore is theology's adequacy for explaining the depth and breadth of Being's self-disclosure in human experience. In this sense, explanatory adequacy can be inclusive of applicability as well, because as a methodological reflection it must incorporate a justification for the application of method in its explanation. And to give assent to the justification is to recognize that it is applicable or appropriate to the present existential situation.

Recognizing both the universal scope of theological discourse as well as the finite character of each item asserted, one important goal of theological method is always to point beyond itself; to transcend itself. It is always in the process of projecting visions of the divine which transcend its own presuppositional point of departure. Theological method most honestly reflects its own historicity when it occasionally withdraws support from the fixity of finalized or dogmatic assertions. Such theology has an inherent revisionist dimension. Without the self-critical judgment upon its own provisional nature, theological method would lose its dynamic movement and slip into a *de facto* and idolatrous claim that its own conceptuality is more universal and more fundamental than the God to which it points.

The loss of this dynamic also leads to a loss of its adequacy to illuminate. Because experience itself is dynamic and ever widening, a theological conception which is prevented from doing so by fixed dogma cannot help but render our understanding of God as increasingly irrelevant. A concep-

33. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 4-6.

tion of God can be true for us only when we honestly affirm that no other conception of reality that excludes God can more adequately illuminate the whole of our experience.

What is usually referred to as the "crisis" of the modern theologian is the challenge made by secularity to provide a more adequate understanding of reality. The theologian is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand he has committed himself through his own personal faith to articulate the beliefs of the church-community of which he is a believing member. But, on the other hand, the theologian shares many of the values and perspectives of the secular community, especially those relating to the methods employed in scholarly or scientific research. The modern theologian, standing in the wake of Descartes, endorses the same requirements for autonomous judgment, critical reflection, and properly skeptical hard-mindedness that are endorsed by his secular colleagues in philosophy, history, and the sciences. What should happen, then, in the event that his research proves that a traditional religious belief is poorly founded or faulty in some other way? To be intellectually honest, he must take steps to revise that belief. This is the inescapable revisionist thrust of theology that strives to be adequate. But the problem is that such revisionism could be construed as undermining the theologian's own faith and that of the church-community to which he has professed loyalty.

However, modern secularity can not go without criticism from theology, especially if secularity has formed its world-view on the false assumption of the ultimate dualism of subject and object. We have the right to ask if secularity itself provides the most adequate explanation for what-is? Does the secular vision have the power to illuminate the length and breadth and depth of the human experience with reality in a way superior to that of the Christian symbols and conceptions of God? A chorus of criticism leveled against the inadequacies of the secular understanding has sung out recently, especially the voices of thinkers such as Langdon Gilkey, Schubert Ogden, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and David Tracy.

The challenge of theology is to ask with all intellectual honesty whether or not the Christian concept of God can better illuminate the self-understanding of modernity than can the secular vision. If the Christian understanding of God is explanatorily adequate, then it should be able to do better than any competing vision to explain even the grounds for secularity itself. David Tracy says the theologian's "claim is that nothing less than a proper understanding of those central beliefs—in revelation, in God, in Jesus Christ—can provide an adequate understanding, a correct reflective inventory, or an existentially appropriate symbolic representation of the fundamental

faith of secularity." The challenge is to "provide evidence to fair-minded critics inside and outside Christianity for the meaning and truth of the central Christian symbols."³⁴

If in the struggle the secular vision should prove itself better able to illuminate the scope of human experience with the reality of what-is, then honesty would compel the theologian to yield. On the other hand, should the theological claim regarding God prove to provide the more comprehensive illumination, then we may have confidence that it is anchored in the truth.

Theological Method and Historical Study

Even though the aim is finally to uncover or disclose what-is in its most comprehensive being, theology must begin from somewhere. Just because method has a tendency to hide the truth of the whole does not mean theology can go without any method whatsoever. Because theology is reflective thought, it cannot escape the specificity of one method or another. The term itself comes from *θεος* (God) and *λογος* (word or rational study of) and means the rational study of the divine. Because it is rational it must necessarily be methodic and systematic. Its subject matter, God, spills beyond the perimeters of the system, to be sure, but this only means that the substance of theological reflection must provide an indirect rather than a direct apprehension of the divine. The immediate subject matter of theology, then, is the testimonies of faith found in human history.

As the above analysis has hopefully demonstrated, theological method is not free to begin from some presuppositionless ideal of the absolute or some basic authority (Scripture) which will go forever unchallenged. A method always starts from somewhere, and that starting point is always contingent upon its place in the historical tradition. Consequently, the inescapable conclusion must be that a genuinely self-conscious theological method must begin its work with historical study. Only through the study of history will the substance of theology be found. The very ideas that light up our experience and make it intelligible are alive in the historical tradition of which we are a part, and this includes ideas of the divine as well.

The very fact that we have considered assigning the label "God" to that whole of reality presupposed in all hermeneutical understanding is evidence of the historicity of even this discussion. "God" is a term common to the Western experience with the divine, and within our tradition it presents itself to our consciousness much more quickly than terms such as "Brahman," "Nirvana," or "Tao." Now, it is at least in principle possible that these

34. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 9.

other terms may be found to have greater explanatory adequacy than does the term "God." The only way to make such a determination is to enter an open-minded investigation into the respective traditions of these potentially competing concepts. This is the task of the historian, or perhaps more specifically, the historian of religion.

Because it is the concept of the divine in every culture that usually provides the foundational conceptuality in terms of which the rest of life is given its explanation, the study of the history of religious traditions presents itself as the most likely component within the wider field of history to provide the substance for theological reflection. However, predominantly secular societies which relegate the notion of the divine to a position of at most marginal importance require a broader cultural analysis.

Among the traditions requiring such historical investigation is the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Systematic Christian theology cannot begin its work until it has some content or material to systematize, and that content must be drawn into theology by historical retrieval. Of course, it is not a simple two stage process of first assembling the historical data and then putting it in order. The dynamic of the hermeneutical circle leads the systematician to reinterpret the material it has in such a way as to ask the historian to go back to reassess the data; the reassessed data in turn modify the system, and the process continues dynamically in spiral fashion. The point I wish to stress here is that theology can never escape its historical base, consequently, historical study is the necessary and essential starting point for theological method. And if this is the case, theology cannot justify itself simply upon the basis of arbitrary dogmatic authority, existential confirmation, or a personal infusion of the Holy Spirit; rather it is constrained to make its peace with historical-critical method. And a specifically Christian theological method has the task of testing its own historically-based constructive assertions about God to see if they more than any other competing conceptuality better illuminate the whole horizon of human experience.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.